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# Popular Education and Participatory Research: Facing Inequalities in Latin America<sup>\*</sup>

Danilo R. Streck

The paper analyzes the construction of a pedagogical-investigative method, which has as its key element the development of strategies for overcoming inequalities in Latin American societies. Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, among others, provide elements for understanding the origins of a method which, in research, has a close relation to the educational dimension and, in education, integrates the investigative dimension as a part of the process of developing active subjects in their communities. The paper refers to research projects that were developed using participatory methodologies, attempting to identify some recent developments, advances and limits. Among these projects, special attention is paid to those that show the role of pedagogical mediations in participatory social processes in South Brazil (state of Rio Grande do Sul), particularly the activities of a garbage recycling association and the implementation of the participatory budget in a municipality in South Brazil.

**Key words:** popular education, participatory research, method, inequality, pedagogical mediation

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## Introduction

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the space-time for the incubation and birth of movements that had a profound impact on society and culture, and extend into the current century, quite often with new configurations. As parts of these movements we find participatory research and popular education, both of which grew out of the context of a strong awareness of inequalities in Latin America and the struggle for social justice, and were accompanied by an equally strong repression. Through the convergence of these practices a method for knowing reality was constructed. It was used both for pedagogical and investigative purposes, turning a strict delimitation of boundaries between education and research almost impossible.

The aim of this paper is to understand this methodological construction, in two different and complementary steps. One of them consists of retrieving some of the roots that inspired this practice in authors who were at the origin of the process. Special attention will be given to Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire. Each one of them brings his own approach to the subject, respectively as a sociologist and as an educator. Other perspectives could be added, such as Carlos Rodrigues Brandão's anthropological approach, which is equally an obligatory reference in participatory research and in popular education. It is Brandão who probably best represents the dialogue between these two fields.

The issue which is at the core of these authors' writings and practices is the type of knowledge, and the ways of knowing, that could generate changes in our unequal societies. The starting point was the recognition that the question about the knowledge that matters has to be referred to social and cultural reality, and that the way of producing knowledge as well as of relating to knowledge has to be revised on the basis of reality itself. This same reasoning found its way into other fields, revealing itself in expressions such as Theology of Liberation, Philosophy of Liberation, Popular Communication and Theater of the Oppressed.

In the second part of the paper there is an attempt to identify some basic axes in the methodological construction, using as an empirical parameter studies that employed participatory research methodologies and have a clear interface with popular education. One of them (Herbert 2008) refers to the

participatory budget, and its author tried to identify whether, and to what extent, the participatory budget could be considered a space for the preparation of community and political leaders capable of producing a rupture with the current clientelism of representative democracy. Another study (Adams 2007a) tried to identify emancipatory pedagogical mediations in the Recycling Association of Dois Irmãos (RS).

My working hypothesis in this paper is that in these struggles, both in social movements and in theory, a peculiar method has been produced. This method, although unique, also has many points of convergence with processes carried out in other places. Five issues are highlighted in this reflection: the contextual character of knowledge, protagonism and participation, the recognition of the other, the encounter of different forms of knowledge, and the diversity of mediations. It is a modest contribution to the enormous task of understanding and organizing the richness of experience that exists under the names of participatory research and popular education.

### **Inequality as an epistemological issue**

The chronic inequality in Latin America is still the object of study in different areas, and today we have a rather accurate overview of its geography, history and particularly of its effect on people's lives in terms of health care, education and access to cultural and material resources. Based on this information, it is impossible to simplistically ascribe inequalities to people's character, to a historical fate of an inferior people, to disregard or unwillingness by government officials or to an unfavorable international situation. In this sense, what is known today as social exclusion could be just another name for a perverse inclusion in a multifaceted unfair social reality (Martins 2003).

Just as there is a set of factors that interact to produce inequalities, there are also many possibilities of acting upon their causes and many initiatives to minimize their impacts. The disenchantment with great and final revolutions has brought to the surface different proposals, both big and small, which are complementary at times, but which sometimes cross and crash. It seems difficult to deny the relevance of compensatory policies such as quotas for blacks at universities or the actual assistance of the family grant programme

for the unemployed (Silva 2007). Additionally, solidary popular economy creates real spaces and opportunities for those who are outside the “formal” economy. At the same time, there is an awareness that many of these actions are palliative or, at best, can represent trials of alternatives. Maybe the fact that, in recent years in popular education, the debate on its relationship with social movements has been resumed is a symptom of the perception of the insufficiency of those policies and actions (see, e.g., CEAAL 2008; Lins/Oliveira 2008).

The World Social Forum, whose first edition was held in Porto Alegre in 2001, mirrors this polymorphic search for “another possible world” (Streck 2004). This Forum is a meeting place for old and new social movements, public policy managers and anarchist activists who do not put much faith in governments, and show their disbelief in the possibility of changing power structures. There we find intellectuals side by side with social activists, joined much more by the will of finding paths than by certainties. It is society on the move that meets there in search for alternatives.

In this context of searching in many spaces and in various ways, the question asked and answered by Herbert Spencer (1966) in 1859, in an essay titled “What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?”, acquires a new relevance. Simply put, he starts by saying that there is no knowledge that does not have some relevance for some purpose; therefore, it will always have a relative character. According to Spencer, the central issue is “how to live” and to address this issue, “the uniform answer is – Science” (apud Kazamias 1966: 158). “Science” (with capital letter!) would be the guideline for the “how to live”, ranging from the preservation of life to issues of intellectual, moral and religious conduct.

In this one and a half century since Spencer wrote this essay, there was a deconstruction of faith in science, as well as an extension of the scope of what is regarded as scientific. Even the central question itself has undergone changes, since the “how to live” implies that there is some level of agreement about the meaning of life and the direction of actions. Additionally, as it answered many questions on the human being and the world, science raised other still more complex questions. By the way, one century before Spencer, in 1750, in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau (1983: 343)

already expressed his distrust of the power of sciences to “improve customs” and promote happiness: “If our sciences are useless in the goals they set for themselves, they are even more dangerous in the effects they produce.” And he continues with his acid critique by asking: “Answer me, I repeat, you from whom we have received so much sublime knowledge, if you had never taught us anything about these things, would we be less numerous, less well governed, less formidable, less thriving or more perverse?”

These same questions on what knowledge matters, and on the type of science that is able to interfere in unequal society, were asked in Latin America at a time of emergence of the popular classes which Thiago de Mello (1980: 27) expressed with these verses as a tribute to the man that learned how to read the world and the word:

(...) I ask your permission  
to announce that, to the liking of Jesus,  
this reborn man is a new man:  
  
he crosses the fields spreading  
the good news, calling his peers  
for a fair fight, face to face,  
  
against the four hundred-year-old beast,  
but whose thick bile will not resist  
forty hours of total tenderness.

This time marks the emergence of the people as a new protagonist in the production of knowledge. It does not mean that only now, through literacy programmes, the people could start to think about their day-to-day problems and solve them. What happens is that now, due to their greater awareness as subjects, they take the word and make themselves heard. On the other hand, the voices of disillusionment with traditional academic knowledge’s capability of producing change have become louder.

The school, understood here generically as institutionalized education, reveals its crisis and it has been criticized not so much as a producer of inequalities, but rather as a legitimizer of existing inequalities. The classic book by Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, has become a reference in this criticism. In his book, Illich argued that the transformation of society could not happen without the abolition of the main institution that supports it, i.e., the school. In

Brazil, a group of educators published the provocative book, *Cuidado Escola!* (Watch out, School!) (Harper 1989), with a presentation by Paulo Freire, showing the school as a dangerous and efficient society-reproducing machine. Along the same line of reasoning, in the United States researchers concluded that the compensatory measures of the '1960s were ineffective to correct inequalities, and that the belief that "marginal institutions" such as the school can be effective to operate structural changes is fallacious: "As long as egalitarians assume that public policy cannot contribute to economic equality directly but must proceed by ingenious manipulation of marginal institutions like the schools, progress will remain glacial. If we want to move beyond this tradition, we will have to establish political control over the economic institutions that shape our society. This is what other countries usually call socialism. Anything less will end in the same disappointment as the reforms of the 1960s" (Jencks 1972: 265).

This is the time when, both in research and education, people try to find alternatives outside traditional educational and academic institutions, due to their limitations in terms of a real involvement in the transformation of society. Popular education flourishes among popular groups and research leaves its safe haven at the university, which as a rule is strictly disciplinary, to get involved with a multiplicity of partners in order to understand the reality to be transformed. In the words of Orlando Fals Borda: "We were sociologists, anthropologists, economists, theologians, artists, farmers, educators and social workers. Thus, we were a diverse and complex group. Some of us had decided to give up our university routines and search for alternatives" (Fals Borda 2007: 17). He, then, proceeds by mentioning converging movements in India (da Silva, Wignajara, Rahman), Brazil (Paulo Freire, Darcy Ribeiro), Mexico (Stavenhagen), Tanzania (Marja Schwantz) and Colombia (Camilo Torres), among others.

Some decades have passed, but many of the difficulties faced by these pioneers continue to exist in our society to a greater or lesser degree or in different forms. Next we analyze how some of these same principles are reinvented in current research practices. For this analysis, we highlight five aspects of the method that were forged in these practices: the contextual character of knowledge; protagonism or participation; the recognition of the

other; the encounter of different types and ways of knowing, and the diversity of mediations. An important element in this analysis is, above all, the identification of the new convergences that are generated in practice, because, as Fals Borda pointed out, “maybe the interesting thing about this effort lies precisely in the nature of this search that never ends. If it ended, it would not be so interesting, it would be like searching for a square, finished, perfect, non-human product” (Fals Borda/Brandão 1987: 11).

### **Aspects of the method under construction**

#### ***The contextual character of knowledge***

One century before people started talking about participatory research, José Martí criticized Latin American universities for producing knowledge out of context and, thus, being unable to help govern these countries or produce a knowledge that could promote development on the basis of their own nature. “How could government officials come from universities, if there is no university in America that teaches the basics of the art of governing, namely the analysis of the unique elements of the peoples of America? Young people go out to the world, trying to guess things with their North-American or French glasses on, and aspire to govern a people they do not know” (Martí 2007: 53). The first condition for a good member of government would be to know the nature of his/her people and land.

José Martí’s struggle is against a university that is detached from the real problems of society or, at least, from the majority of the population. Knowledge could not be merely for the delight of a class that devotes itself to it as if they lived on another planet. For him, “knowing is solving” (ibid.). That is, knowledge is (also) a tool to intervene in the world with the goal of helping each man and woman to have access to what society has produced and be part of the society of their time.

In participatory research and in popular education this view is radicalized to classify knowledge into what Orlando Fals Borda (2007: 19) calls world view or *Weltanschauung*: there is a Eurocentric world view of external activities or scientists and another one based on the immediate and ordinary. Alejandro Moreno Olmedo (1993), an intellectual with a cross-disciplinary



background, when noticing that the imported theories, modern or post-modern, did not help in understanding his work in the popular neighbourhoods of Caracas (Venezuela), concluded that it was really a different *episteme*, which had as a reference not the productive *homo oeconomicus* of modernity nor the post-modern *homo ludens* dedicated to meet individual needs and pleasures, but *homo convivialis*, whose key feature is the relationship. His conclusion was that without knowing the set of intersubjective relationships that regulate life in community, intervention initiatives were doomed to failure.

Telmo Adams reports on his approach to the group following a research proposal that brings together the participatory action, participatory research and training-research.

When expressing personal, unique meanings, they made their choices and valued certain things, depending on the ethos constructed throughout their life stories. The latter constitute a kind of mediating matrix that makes them to get interested in and appropriate the processes experienced and perceived in the relationships with the environment and the world view of the subjects. In the connection between training and investigative “listening”, implications related to conscious and unconscious interests could be perceived.

What Adams calls *ethos* is similar to what Orlando Fals Borda calls world view (or *Weltanschauung*), and Alejandro Moreno Olmedo calls “episteme”. It is the recognition of previous conditions in the group that determine their expression and their way of knowing. Therefore, just as researchers never find a void of knowledge, they cannot assume either that everyone knows in the same way. Based on this knowledge, Orlando Fals Borda produced his *Historia doble de la Costa* in two channels. One of them presents history from the point of view of authors relegated to the background in academic production. The other channel uses traditional academic language. Similarly, in the course of his research project Telmo Adams produced, along with his PhD thesis, a book with the history of the Dois Irmãos Waste Recyclers Association (Adams 2005), and another book describing the dynamics used during the research process (Adams 2007b) as a memory of the group’s journey, and as an instrument for other associations and groups.

### *Protagonism and participation*

“Participation is not an innocent category.” These words by Maria Ozanira da Silva e Silva (UNISINOS 2006), in a discussion on participatory research, illustrate the complexity implied in the topic. Participation can be used for different purposes and with different intentions and can take place at different levels. Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (UNISINOS 2006) identifies three of these levels of “participatory work”, namely: a base or grassroots work, a theoretical work and a practical work. Just for the fact of being participatory, research cannot do without the theory or knowledge from other studies in the field. Actually, the researcher’s commitment includes theoretical-methodological rigour. In Brandão’s words: “Sometimes one conducts participatory research and does not take the trouble to go to the library to flip through master’s dissertations that may have anticipated in the ’1950s, ’60s, ’70s the same questions or a category similar to the one I have been working on with the black people of Goiás.” We take leaps to reach the people, and shut our eyes to scholars who may be, according to him, “my first participants”.

Participation means recognizing that the researcher shares protagonism with other people whose more immediate interests do not always coincide with the interests of the researcher. “Both the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched subjects’ develop an interrogative potential about current society. They set guidelines, they dream, see what the eyes have not yet seen. The existential dimension of both is altered. Great progress is made when participatory research is conducted without an exclusive vested interest” (Sérgio Herbert). If the researcher is preparing a doctoral thesis, the group or community obviously does not have the academic commitment of submitting a thesis, let alone the intention of defending complex arguments before a panel. I highlight here some excerpts of statements by representatives of groups involved in research projects, where we can see the motivations for participating, on the basis of a question they have been asked about their understanding of the researcher’s role:

The reflections (with the researcher) make us think better about the work and also about things outside of work, making participation possible. (...) Telmo is helping us to build ourselves, us, the group, inside. And there is something else: Telmo has been participating with us for two years now.

So, the book we wrote about the 10 years, everything is in here (showing the book), our whole journey since 1994, when the work in Dois Irmãos started. Then, Telmo helped undo these things so that we could put on paper not only the work. This disseminates our work. (Jair, member of the Dois Irmãos Waste Recyclers Association, UNISINOS 2006).

The first issue that is really significant in this participation process is the opportunity of having a different perspective on what we do. We are in the eye of the hurricane: the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Mayor, let's put it that way, those who are at the frontline of the Participatory Budget. The researcher brings another approach, another perspective and I think this is very important, as well as the theoretical foundation, precisely in order to challenge ourselves. (Gilberto Flach, Secretary of Education of the municipality of Barão, UNISINOS 2006).

*"Think better"*: Participation has, in both above mentioned cases, an immediate interest of making the work more effective, and improving work conditions. The researcher is not expected to give solutions for specific problems, but rather contribute to broaden the perspective. The Secretary of Education, at another point of his comment, says that "the academic perspective helps problematize some issues". In the first testimonial, Jair says that Telmo, the researcher, helps "undo these things" in the sense of opening up issues and identifying the various implications. That is, rather than answers, co-operation to ask better questions is expected.

*"Build ourselves"*: The participants in the research do not expect the researcher to be an expert in group dynamics or conflict management, although in the case of the Waste Recyclers Association a strong work to strengthen the group was carried out on request of the members themselves. What this sentence reveals is the importance of an outsider for their self-recognition as a group. The research is both a result from this group awareness and a tool for promoting it.

*"Put on paper"*: The researcher is seen as someone who has developed skills that the group does not have. In the case of the waste recyclers, Telmo Adams wrote the history, but Jair was clear: "The ideas are ours, but of course Telmo helped with some additional things." The group is producing a video where the same idea of protagonism returns: "We do not use outsiders to speak on our behalf. We speak with our own, it does not matter how

people express themselves.” What stands out here is the importance of having a research product (or by-product), the group will feel as its author or co-author (Adams 2005, 2007).

*“Disseminate the work”*: Both comments show the role of the researcher as someone who makes the work of the group known elsewhere and who, at the same time, brings information on similar experiences to the group. The Secretary of Education of Barão highlighted very positively the fact that Sérgio Herbert took the Participatory Budget experience to Germany, and brought from there information on other community participation experiences. The visit by someone from Germany, who came with the researcher, deserved special mention. This interest is connected to the desire to measure the reach and the implications of the work that is being done. Today, in any given group, there is the awareness that problems and solutions go beyond the local boundaries. The farmers of Barão know that the value of their products is related to domestic and international markets and the waste recyclers are aware of the fact that environmental issues do not respect geographic borders.

### ***The recognition of the other***

When reflecting on his experience in Colombia, Orlando Fals Borda called the experience of meeting the other – ordinary people in the neighborhoods and communities – “fascinating, enriching and emancipatory”, an educational experience for all those involved. “We realize that the scientific spirit can flourish in the most modest and primitive circumstances, that an important work is not necessarily an expensive, complicated one, nor should it be the monopoly of a class or the academia” (Fals Borda 2007: 19).

Likewise, in the literacy project co-ordinated by Paulo Freire the survey of the lexical universe was made with the actual participation of the community itself, together with an interdisciplinary team. They recognized that there is no culture void or a knowledge void. What we have are silenced cultures (the culture of silence) and forms of knowledge that are dismissed by the hegemonic *episteme* to which the academic logic usually belongs.

Recognizing the other requires a critically vigilant attitude, avoiding falling both into prejudgments and the simple affirmation of the other, or an idealized and embellished view of their knowledge. In this case, according to Brandão, the research is no longer participatory, becoming *accomplice research*: “I already know right away that these experiences must be wonderful. So I will induce you to tell me it is wonderful, so that in my thesis I can objectively say that this was the greatest educational project, maybe in the whole world. Particularly if it is in my party, my church or my group” (UNISINOS, 2006). He then seeks in anthropology the idea of *defamiliarizing*, or *denaturalizing*, as a way in which the researcher can make sure that he/she is really an other, vis-à-vis the group or organization where he/she conducts his/her investigation.

Brandão also makes a distinction between quantitative, qualitative and participatory research:

In quantitative research I mistrust myself. Then I have to create instruments that go beyond myself, that erase me and turn into objectivity what will go through me. In qualitative research I am the research instrument, I trust in me, I talk to people, I believe in what I will write. In relation to the traditional qualitative research, participatory research is the research in which I trust the other. The other is someone in whom I believe, and who is in conditions equal or close to mine to produce knowledge (UNISINOS 2006).

This does not mean that one type of research is better than the other, or that we should not improve research instruments to guarantee data objectivity. Brandão’s argument seems to be simpler: any type of research goes through the researcher’s subjectivity and the subjectivity of the participating subjects. Out of this intersubjectivity, built in a relationship of trust, will come not only the research results, but it will also dictate the pathways of the investigation process. In this testimonial on the research process in the Participatory Budget, Sérgio Herbert stresses the ability of the researcher to reflect on him/herself when surrounded by a reality that absorbs him/her. Only in this way, according to him, will the researcher “have the ability to distinguish the feelings, the passions from the rationality of the journey”. Then, the researcher can be considered an educator and the educator, a researcher, “be-

cause he/she is investigating social elements and simultaneously producing educative reflections on the steps of a given social group or groups”.

### *The encounter of forms of knowledge*

Several phrases have been used to express the relationship established in a “gnoseological situation” (Paulo Freire) where the other is recognized as a subject. First the idea of exchange of forms of knowledge was introduced: the scholarly or scientific forms of knowledge on the one hand and the popular forms of knowledge on the other hand. The principle that guided this proposal was that everyone who participated in a process of knowing has something to give and take, insofar as all are incomplete beings. Thus, there was a sense of complementation between forms of knowledge from experience and scientifically tested knowledge. The limitation of this metaphor lies in the fact that in the exchange something that is mine becomes someone else’s and vice versa. Therefore, probably under the influence of the ecclesial base communities, people also talked of sharing knowledge. Just as in the ecclesial practice of Communion the fruits of work, symbolized by the bread and wine, are shared, the fruits of knowledge are also shared in a gesture of gratuitousness and solidarity. In this sharing there is also the miracle of multiplication.

But power, as Foucault (1979) taught us, pervades all relationships, including (or above all) those in which knowledge is at stake. Hence the idea that this “gnoseological situation” would be more adequately characterized as a “cultural negotiation”. According to Marco Raúl Mejía and Myriam Awad (2001: 133), in cultural negotiation there is an agreement and a shared understanding that enables action on the basis of the knowledge built up in a group. Thus, cultures, mediations, meanings, representations, technical knowledge, institutionalities and the internal logic of learning itself are negotiated.

In each one of these metaphors used to name the encounter of subjects who try to get to know their reality in order to transform it, there are both positive aspects and limits. All of them, somehow, express the genuine attempt to think polysemically about reality and correspond to the Freirean notion of dialogue. According to Freire, dialogue is essentially the “encounter of human beings, mediated by the world, to *pronounce it*” (Freire 1981: 93).

He seeks to express an understanding of dialogue that goes beyond the interpersonal relationship, and incorporates the idea of a transforming action of autonomous and solidary subjects. Therefore, this action with the others and in the world cannot do without some basic attributes thus identified by him: deep love for the world and people, humility, a strong faith in people as an *a priori*, trust as a result of the previous conditions, hope, true thinking.

Additionally, there are differences regarding the end result of this encounter of subjects. Orlando Fals Borda (2007) sees the emergence of a popular science based on the recognition and dynamization of the underground history of the ordinary peoples of Latin America and the projection towards the future of their founding values, namely, the solidarity of the indigenous peoples, the freedom of the black, the dignity of peasant communities and the autonomy of settlers. To Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (UNISINOS 2006), science has to be plural, with different versions of it living together in the same world. What matters is to know whom it serves. To Paulo Freire (1989), a dialectic relationship is established between knowledge from experience and the scholarly knowledge in which both are changed and surpassed for the creation of a new knowledge. What brings these points of view close to each other is the possibility of the emergence of the new, on the basis of an honest and sincere encounter with subjects who recognize their co-authorship in the production of knowledge.

### ***The diversity of mediations***

The experience of participatory research originated in different places, which sometimes did not communicate much, in different areas and was often inspired by different ideologies. This explains why we find such a rich diversity of theoretical and practical mediations, showing a great dynamicity and ability to adapt. Additionally, participatory research assumes that the methodology does not exist apart from the researcher, just as it does not exist apart from the groups with whom one works. Furthermore, the methodology changes according to local political conditions and the correlation of forces, as well as according to the strategies for social transformation and short- and medium term tactics.

In this context we use the concept of mediation, related to both theory and empirical context of research, to refer to the set of instruments which are necessary for grasping reality and for elaborating meanings about it. Mediations may range from already existing theories and understandings about a subject, to the actual methods of gathering and interpreting research data.

In the field of theory, we have notions that range from dialectics and phenomenology of the Western philosophical tradition, to the search for rationalities and sentimentalities for which these concepts mean little or nothing. Theory itself is seen as a practice at the service of the understanding and transformation of reality; thus, it is not external to the research process. It is the moment of lucidity of the practice itself, in search of new paths and strategies. Empirical research does not play the role of confirming a given theory; thus, validity criteria are added taking into account the perception of the local reference groups, in addition to occasions for participation, intervention or insertion into the concrete reality.

This understanding and use of theory entails also a weakness which participatory research shares with much Third World research. While rightly acknowledging the plurality of paths that lead us to know reality, it also unveils the “epistemological orphanage” (Padrón Guillén 2006: 11) due to a historical dependence on theoretical developments imported from the “north”. Participatory research, while representing a moment of rupture with imported epistemological approaches, can be seen as an attempt to develop an understanding of science which draws on the multiplicity of cultural practices which can be found in Latin America. This development, as exemplified in authors as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, means neither isolation nor denial of what can be seen as a shared history. It presupposes a dialogue in which, instead of mere transposition or application of theories, there is a responsible exercise of translation, motivated by the sense of incompleteness, and the respective convergent motivations originated in different cultures.

In the field of empirical mediations, we have concepts ranging from the classic questionnaires to complex systematization dynamics. As a practical example of what can be considered basic moments in the research process, I will draw again on the experience of Telmo Adams (2007a) and his research



project on the emancipatory educative experiences in the Dois Irmãos Waste Recyclers Association (ARDI).

This Association was founded in 1994 as the result of a long process of negotiation of a group of people engaged in ecological issues with the local administration. It is known in the region as a success story, a fact certainly related to the four pillars of the Association described by one of its founders (Spies 2005: 56). The first pillar is that it is an ecological project, not just an enterprise to separate materials, in order to sell it and provide an income for the members. Since its beginning, there was a commitment to help changing the habits of the local population regarding the destination of the waste produced in homes, offices and factories. Secondly, it was understood as an economic project based on principles of co-operation, attempting to respect differences of gender, age, schooling, race and culture. The third pillar was the development of technical and organizational capacity, which meant, for instance, studying the production process of paper, of glass, of plastics, among others. Finally, the fourth pillar refers to the relationship with other social actors and partners, such as the public administration, the buyers, the universities, the factories, the NGOs, and other similar organizations.

Given the participatory approach of the research project, the whole process was very much influenced by the political and ethical principles that sustain the Association. The researcher obviously did not lose his autonomy, but he had to negotiate the process with the Association. In short, there can be identified the following movements or moments in the process:

- a) Mutual recognition: Collection of general impressions through direct observation and dialogue with the members of the co-ordinating committee.
- b) Preparation of the action plan: Elaboration and discussion of the actual research programme to be carried out, attempting to identify what Paulo Freire names “generative themes”.
- c) The execution: Data collection using a variety of instruments: group discussions, individual interviews, observation, investigation diary, etc. As stated in the agreement with the group, there was given special attention to the teaching-learning moments. In the analysis, there were organ-

ized categories according to the degrees of interest, considering thematic axes, dimensions or indicators that began to emerge.

- d) Feedback: Although feedback about partial findings occurred throughout the whole process, the end of the project represented a double responsibility: to publish the findings for the academic public as well as to subsidize the Association in organizing their own knowledge about their work, for instance, in the preparation of a video in which they used data from the research but assumed the authorship themselves.

Looking at the above mentioned instruments which make up the mediations on the research process, one can obviously not find such thing as absolute originality in participatory research. It was also never meant as such. One of its basic postulates has been that the search for objectivity is not identical with neutrality, and that theories and instruments of data collection and analysis are integrated within a complex value systems, and related to political-ideological commitments.

### **Some final comments**

It has been argued in this paper that popular education and participatory research are part of an effort, in Latin America, to construct a method of knowing that is effective for understanding and facing inequalities in Latin America. Both in what became known as participatory research and popular education, researchers and educators found that it was important to *get soaked* in reality, based on the recognition that, without the participation of those with the greatest interest in transforming society towards democracy and humanization, the knowledge produced would have little effect on the life of the people and society. As Orlando Fals Borda insisted, Participatory Action-Investigation (*Investigación Acción Participativa* – IAP), insofar as it is a method, is also a philosophy of life for the “feeling and thinking” individuals (*individuos sentipensantes*) who are willing to struggle for changes and to better understand them.

The development of this approach can only be understood within the struggle against colonialism which, as we know, extends beyond the economic level. In the context of this struggle, the question is not only who we

are as Latin Americans, but what kind of knowledge are we producing, and for what purposes. This is not an easy question in any place of the world, but there is a special sense of urgency in countries or regions that find themselves at the periphery of the global world. Particularly in Latin America it means recovering a past which has been erased in the name of progress and civilization, most often at the expense of the vast majority of the population. It means also bringing to light social practices, and the voice of social agents that have been kept within the *culture of silence*.

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